



## CIRCLE, PYRAMID AND MIRROR

### *RODERICK RANDOM* and the question of form

**Stéphanie Noirard**

*Université de Lyon, Jean Moulin – Lyon III*

*Université Denis Diderot – Paris VII*

The majority of articles that have been written on Tobias Smollett will, at some point, acknowledge that he has always been considered as a minor writer. Some will defend the thesis comparing him to greater Defoe, Fielding or Sterne, others offer a reevaluation that sets him on an equal footing with the most famous eighteenth century thinkers. One characteristic in particular which has fuelled the debates is what could be regarded as Smollett's unstable ideology or seemingly contradictory values. On the subject of form, he is

disgusted by the modern taste of architecture [...], churches and palaces [...] crowded with petty ornaments, which distract the eye, and by breaking the design into a variety of little parts, destroy the effect of the whole. [1976: 257]

The description could nevertheless be applied to *Roderick Random* which Douglas Brooks describes as leaving an "overriding impression [...] of disorder and fragmentation, in subject matter and in structure", adding that "Robert Alter has justly remarked on the way it reflects the frenetic and neurotic quality of life in the period" [1973: 123]. No wonder then that there should be such a wide variety of critical comments on the question, all the more so as the alleged memoirs soon turns into a combination of travel narration and fictitious history, interspersed with dialogues, poems and play extracts.

Relying on a discrete yet crucial sentence uttered by Roderick's uncle, "I trust to no creed but the compass", which will be attributed to the author himself provided the word is understood as compasses, the geometrical rather

than nautical instrument, the aim of this paper is to investigate into what may be seen as an attempt to structure a novel genre and the society it illustrates. Focussing first on the macrocosm and the obviously circular but also pyramidal structure of the plot and going down to the mirroring events and their impact on the microcosmic level the objective is, through the theme of transgression, to highlight how much form mattered to Smollett in an 18<sup>th</sup> century literary and philosophical context.

The circularity of *Roderick Random's* plot is obvious from the very first lines of chapter one. The Sage's interpretation of the hero's mother's dream according to which he "would be a great traveller, [...] would undergo many dangers and difficulties, and at last return to his native land," [2008: 1] notwithstanding, Roderick appears to his mother as the objective correlative of his fate, a tennis ball that boomerangs back to where it had been thrown. The name of the protagonist itself, phonetically and semantically suggests some circular movement as well. The /d/ sound of Roderick Random acts as a fix centre while /r/ and /o/ revolve around it. On the other hand, while an interesting meaning of "random" is "a frame used in printing", the etymology of Roderick is Rodrigo, a kind of snuff, perhaps in reference to the round trips from Glasgow to the West Indies in the tobacco trade. Besides coming back to his native land at the end of the novel, the hero will hence, throughout his journey, undergo topographical round trips from London to Jamaica and back again twice, from England to France, from London to Bath and from one street to another in a pilgrimage through life. The fact that he always comes back however, seems to question his capacity to progress and underlines a tendency to make the same mistakes several times. Hence his fortune may be looked upon as following a similar circular pattern as he finds himself in turn poor and without kith or kin or wealthy and enjoying the boisterous life of London bourgeois society. It may however be argued that the structure of the plot and subplots is not so much circular as ellipse-like, namely they are circles with a difference as each time the character is rewarded or punished for his deeds and eventually gains a little by his experience. So that although change of place or fortune basically remains constant, acting as a directrix, the life of the protagonist is a moving point according to his maturity. This enables him to progress, though sometimes modestly, instead of entrapping him into a locked fate.

This induces a reevaluation of the whole structure which first appeared as

a random piling up of only chronologically related events. A second, more subtle structure emerges, this time shaped like two pyramids, one being inverted, whose apex is situated precisely at the middle of the novel from chapters 34 to 36. Douglas Brooks suggests that the novel is structured around the disappearance of Don Rodriguez, Roderick's father. He points out that the meeting with so-to-speak resurrected Thomson, chapter 36, is a pro-enactment of the reunion between father and son. In other words, action and tension build up to a pseudo-resolution for about 36 chapters and then go down again for 34 chapters to eventual resolution point and order. Brooks pushes the argument one stage further noting that both reunions had been "prepared for by Roderick, who, in chapter 34, after nearly dying of a fever, pretends to be dead and suddenly to come to life in order to startle Morgan." [1973: 125]. This suggests a reverse pyramid as the hero has to go down and undergo a symbolic death before he is able to rise again and struggle to better himself and achieve happiness. As for chapter 35, the book's actual middle chapter, it initiates change and reversal in several ways. Now Roderick is born again, he, for some time, renounces friends and country to change ships and improve his career. The fact that his messmate resembles his uncle, another father figure, and gives him a hanger – or sword – and a pair of pistols, two manly attributes, is therefore no coincidence and the chapter closes on Roderick being "obeyed" by four men.

From then on, the path Roderick takes to retrace his footsteps to Scotland is almost the replica of that which first led him to the West Indies. Most of the scenes he has been through are reproduced as in a mirror, which means they are the same, "chirality" excepted. Blatant instances of this are the coach journeys and the highwayman incidents chapters 10 and 54, Strap challenged by the captain chapter 12 and Roderick challenged by the cook chapter 40, his abduction chapters 24 and 41 or his two journeys to the West Indies. The reappearance of characters such as ubiquitous Strap, turned into Monsieur d'Estrapes for a while, or Morgan, Jackson, Thomson, Lavement, Potion, or Roderick's family members, the various father figures, Narcissa whom Don Rodriguez describes as looking like the hero's mother, and the different ships that stand for so many households also contribute to the mirror effects in the book. Although they may be perceived as a series of clumsy coincidences wanting logic, coherent order, and plausibility, they in fact represent a means of valuing the characters' progression and capacity to interact with the world by analysing his response to similar stimuli at different stages of experience.

Meanwhile the text acquires a multidimensionality close to what Derrida calls “différance” as the reader is made to understand that action/reaction is not a binary system, that any particular event triggers a multiplicity of reactions and chain consequences. This is an idea that was gradually being plodded through and was to become a common feature in the novel, a literary genre still in its infancy at the time and which, by thus transgressing formal rules and remaining open to interpretation, appeared as a new mode of representation reflecting on man’s place in the universe, the relation between the individual and society and between chaos and order.

The century of enlightenment was described as neo-classical, meaning that Literature was structured according to Horace and thus involved the notions of clarity, reason, laws of decorum as well as agreement between form and theme. In his own preface, Smollett criticises worthless writers of romance<sup>1</sup> who “instead of supporting the character of their heroes, by dignity of sentiment and practice, distinguished them by their [...] activity and extravagance of behaviour.” He argues their works are “ludicrous and unnatural” and, just like a disease to be cured, they “infect [the world] with the spirit of knight-errantry” [2008: XXXIV]. How then may Smollett’s departure from the classical theories be accounted for? For while the general structure of the novel can be justified, blatant transgression of 18<sup>th</sup> century rules may still be observed. First of all, it cannot be denied, trivial and contradictory to Smollett’s aspiration though that may sound, that some authors were in need of money. Hence, to a certain extent, the breach of decorum to attract the people just as Shakespearean farce was aimed at pleasing the crowd. Smollett thus relies upon traditional picaresque and chamber pot jokes, as well as on English jestbooks, from which he borrows the patterns of his most abject scenes, full of gross sexual and scatological allusions. Scenes of decaying bodies then add up to the picture and are given even more power owing to meticulous empirical analysis. The description of the “epidemick fever” for instance, relies on the sense of sight (“the colour of their skin, being by the extreme putrefaction of their juices, changed into that of soot.”), smell (“the stench that surrounded us”, “unwholesome smell of decayed provision”), and feeling (“The change of the atmosphere”, “the heat of the climate”) [2008: 189-190] which readily contrast

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between Romance and Novel is made evident here. For further reading on the question see Paul Gregory Bator, “Rhetoric and the Novel in the Eighteenth-Century British University Curriculum”, *Eighteenth Century Studies* 30:2, 1997, p. 173-195.

with the euphemistic evocation of the bilious fever as “distemper” or “malady”. This paradoxical reserve may be perceived as a way of apologising for the rude details, pointing out that they are necessary to the scientific cause, perhaps in order to give good conscience to the over-curious yet polite reader, certainly to affirm that multiplying sensible experiences – unpleasant though they may be – is the only way to gain better access to the world and otherness. In that light the novel appears as a didactic means allowing its reader to live a greater number of experiences, be it only by proxy.

That the laws of decorum are overtly trampled on is further justified by a most classical ambition, which is to imitate nature. The classics’ notion of dignity has however been replaced by a form of realism, which is justified in a declaration where the author distinguishes himself from his characters:

That the delicate reader may not be offended at the unmeaning oaths which proceed from the mouths of some persons in these memoirs, I beg leave to promise, that I imagined nothing could more effectually expose the absurdity of such miserable expletives, than a natural and verbal representation of the discourse with which they are commonly interlarded. [2008: XXXVI].

The sentence itself is a stylistic embodiment of transgression as the usual syntactic order has been modified to start with the apology of the author and delay the justification for the offence, thereby reassessing the author’s power on both his plot and rhetoric. As for the understatement, which is a language breach too since it uses a negation to imply a very strong affirmation, it is meant to create complicity between author and reader as is the flattering “every intelligent reader”. This, however, poses a problem, that of the first-person narrator. Although the author of the preface dissociates himself from his novel, whose title has nothing autobiographical to it, *Roderick Random* is a first-person narrative based on some of Smollett’s life events. It uses the same address to the reader as the preface and is presented as “memoirs”, the definitions of which almost always imply either personal life, experience, reminiscences or knowledge. This, again, is a feature *Roderick Random* shares with early novels which were always presented as veracious to counter the puritan argument according to which lying was a sin and the new genre was amoral. The other point in using a first person narrative is therefore to win the reader over as it attracts his curiosity while helping him empathise and realise the imperfections of both romance and humanity (“the humane passions are inflamed; the contrast between dejected virtue, and insulting vice, appears with greater aggravation,

and every impression having a double force on the imagination, the memory retains the circumstance, and the heart improves by the example." [2008: XXXIII]). This is justified by the 18<sup>th</sup> century tradition of satire. Along with mock-heroics, it was the period's most common form. It concerned most literary fields and the aim was to be didactic and entertaining in a fine way. This is what Smollett implies when he declares "I believe I need not trouble myself in vindicating a practice authorised by the best writers in this way" [2008: XXXV]. But while Smollett quotes Servantes and Lesage as his main sources of inspiration, he is also faithful to the Scottish writing tradition of brawling and "flyting" with what Marshall Walker calls the Scottish "propensity for extremes", [1996: 61] and the juxtaposition of contrary elements such as the sacred and the profane it involves. One of the best examples of this tradition is the dispute over religion between Rory's uncle and the priest chapter 42 and the description of the strong-scented, vin du pais and paisanne-loving Capuchin, same chapter. The form of the book, moreover, consisting of pyramids of 69 short chapters, each dedicated to one or more particular incidents, involves a lot of energy and briskness, typical of this tradition, to which must be added a potential for jocular irony and satire. This is where the Scottish form meets and supports the 18<sup>th</sup> century attempt to try to define a link between seemingly unconnected events in order to make up for a rapidly changing world in which social bounds seemed to be dissolving.

Leigh Hunt argued that "there is a vein in Smollett – a Scotch vein – which is always disgusting to people of delicacy," [2004: 286] and purposefully so since transgression becomes a necessary evil and the narrative-I, a mirror held to the face of humanity. Walter Allen rightly points out that Smollett's satire is "homoeopathic", and that it emanates from "the morbidly sensitive man who seeks to cure his contemporaries of the filth they live in by rubbing their noses in it" [in 1996: 59]. Smollett's target is multiple for while the mercantile, individualistic behaviour of the British people is denounced, so is, to a certain extent, the naivety of a character who is unaware of the changes modernity has brought and little able to adapt and defend himself in the world. In time, this cannot but affect the reader whom the novel aimed to educate. This mirroring effect is reproduced stylistically through the use of high and low burlesque. An instance of the former is the famous chamber-pot episode chapter 14. Here the topic is trivial but the style is dignified, using the pyramidal periodic sentence with its convoluting rhythm aimed at delaying the climax:

When we came to Mr. Cringer's door, Strap, to give me an instance of his

politeness, ran to the knocker, which he employed so loud and so long, that he alarmed the whole street; and a window opening up two pair of stairs in the next house, a chamber-pot was discharged upon him so successfully, that the poor barber was wet to the skin, while I, being luckily at some distance, escaped the unsavoury deluge. [2008: 68].

In this case the rhythm is isocolic yet reversed, again as in a mirror, as Strap gets “wet to the skin” while the protagonist escapes unharmed. The last term of the sentence is the epitome of both genre and style as the euphemistic metaphor “unsavoury deluge” hides an even coarser meaning. Sophisticated though it may seem, it actually reinforces the scatological meaning owing to the synaesthesia which alludes to the contents of the chamber pot in gustatory rather than olfactory terms. An instance of low burlesque may then be found chapter 4 when Rory’s agonising grandfather is described as “supported by two of his grand-daughters, who sat on each side of him, sobbing most piteously, and wiping away the froth and slaver as it gathered on his lips” [2008: 12]. The dignified moment of death is then described in ludicrous nautical terms by Rory’s uncle: “Dead! (says my uncle, looking at the body) ay, ay, I’ll warrant him as dead as a herring.” [2008: 13]. Contrary to appearances, however, the burlesque is not meant to represent the lowest castes in a disparaging manner. It averts to experiments on the body in order to criticise society at large and enhance 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophical values.

More than a satirical tool the burlesque may be seen as a framework containing the otherwise too passionate force of fiction. In the case of high burlesque, strict rhetorical rules contain and restrain the ludicrous, allowing a more intellectual joke, and in the case of low burlesque, emotion is, as Marshall Walker has it, “absorbed and cooled by the stylised knockabout mechanisms” [1996: 59]. Contrary to Cartesianism, according to which ideas were innate, empiricism relied on the authority of the senses in which John Locke argued the movements of the soul originated. Thinking well thus meant feeling well. John MacAllister points out that “mind and body were so closely connected that the emotions directly manifested themselves in physical changes. [and that] every motion of the mind had its due effect on the body.” This is evident in Roderick’s bouts of fever or illnesses which follow his every emotional shock such as when he is falsely accused of theft and deserted by his friends, after amorous disappointment, or when he is reunited to his father. Further evidence to the influence of emotion on the mind is ominously to be found chapter 13. Strap and

Roderick are disturbed at night by an old man “gone idiot” running after his tamed raven. Unaware of this, they are so terrified that it “deprive[s] [them] of their senses” [2008: 61]; they are first unable to move (“I was so amazed that I had not power to move my eyes from such a ghastly object, but lay motionless [...]. [W]hen [...] I turned about to Strap, I found him in a fit”), then unable to perceive properly (“he cried with a voice that did not seem to belong to a human creature”, “he repeated in an accent still more preternatural”, “the apparition”, “his fears had magnified the creature to the bigness of a horse”) and ultimately unable to think (“he assured me, that the first must certainly be the soul of some person damned [...]. As for the old man, he took it to be the spirit of somebody murdered long ago in this place”). Emotions need therefore be controlled, failing which, man is bound to be perverted. For as MacAllister argues, “[f]or eighteenth-century medicine, strong emotions obliterated identity; they overwhelmed the person, making him unlike himself”. An instance of this is Narcissa’s aunt whose library, though “composed of the best English historians, poets, and philosophers”, boasts no Latin or Greek authors, and who is “subject to whims”, fancying herself as a hare. This is both psychological and, knowing the sexual connotation attributed to the hare or puss, moral degradation which can only be mended by classical music, namely, harmony and thus perfection of form. Narcissa, the perfect spirit, plays on the nerves – or “strings” – of her aunt (the harpsichord), to heel her body and mind. This is in conformity with the Pythagorean theory according to which the good and good acting is synonymous with harmony.

If personal feelings need to be thus formalised, it is because the individual cannot malfunction or else the social contract is broken and the whole society is imperilled. This is made evident through the descriptions of some characters. The first captain Roderick meets on his way to London has the face of a baboon and the body of a grasshopper. This is, of course, typical of a grotesque caricature, but the precise measurements are intriguing:

He was about five foot and three inches high, sixteen inches of which went to his face and long scraggy neck; his thighs were about six inches in length, his legs resembling spindles or drum-sticks, two feet and an half, and his body, which put me in mind of extension without substance, engrossed the remainder. [2008: 50].

In fact, they are gross transgressions to the canon of proportions as described by the Vitruvian man. The captain is 5 foot 6 instead of 6 foot, and the distance from the bottom of his neck to his hairline is about one quarter instead of one

sixth of his height. These bodily imperfections and breaches of the laws of geometry highlight his moral failure and propensity to disturb social order as will most captains Roderick encounters, though they are supposed to represent authority and see to the good functioning of the whole. Similarly, each time Roderick is over-selfish or does something that goes against the rule of society, such as playing cards, trying to marry a woman for her money's sake, or behaving haughtily towards his friends, he is punished by a stroke of ill-luck, whether pecuniary, physical or spiritual. Contrariwise, what he does to improve his character and that of his brother man is always rewarded. How then may Rory's ultimate attempt at getting rich, which consists in buying and selling slaves, and seems to be rewarded, be accounted for? First of all it is slightly displaced from north to south America, implying that the Spanish, and not the British, are in demand of slaves and thus rejecting the blame on an enemy nation, a nation described as most inhuman: "we [...] could have put off five times the number [of slaves] at our own price." [2008: 410]. More importantly, it highlights the turpitude in which the British nation had fallen since colonisation. Tara Goshal Wallace demonstrates that according to Smollett,

Colonial wars have maimed British soldiers, who are then abandoned by an ungrateful government; [...] the commercialism attending imperial ambition has [...] disrupted traditional rural life [...]. So-called economic progress has dispossessed rural populations of homes and employment and set them adrift, and this influx to metropolitan areas has led not only to a blurring of class markers but also to rampant consumerism, greed, crime, and disease.

Although the theory applies to Smollett's last novel, *the Expedition of Umphry Clinker*, it can still be traced down to *Roderick Random* since the hero is left destitute despite fighting at Cartagena or in the French campaign. As a child, moreover, he is the victim of his family's individualism, namely the harbinger of group dissolution, and as a young man has to face anti-Scottish rejection before being submitted to the corrupt society of London. Such is the vicious circle that eventually leads him to more corruption and the sales of slaves.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century contexts however are so different that trying to accuse or justify Smollett would not make much sense and is beyond the scope of this article. What is important here is the paradox, the very existence of contraries within the same mind. This is reinforced by the set of characters who all have a positive or negative double. More than a mirror effect, it works as a diatonic image of life pointing to Smollett's awareness of human nature. In the

course of his human peregrinations Roderick tries to follow the sun from east to west twice but always comes back to the east, where the light truly rises, for more than fortune, it is moral improvement he is looking for in the person of Narcissa who embodies the three pillars of knowledge (through her mastering music, language and literature), moral strength and beauty. In that light, the mythological allusion refers to the mirror in which Roderick must not admire but judge himself. Following up on the idea of west to east travel, it is in the north east that Roderick finally settles, namely where the angular stone, the master key of all buildings is supposed to be laid, meaning perhaps that he has travelled from darkness to enlightenment and that he has gained mastery over himself. That Roderick ends up in Scotland, his starting point, need not be looked upon as regression but as a form of what Edward Said calls “restoration of geographical identity”.<sup>2</sup> Hence while Roderick has come back full circle to Scotland, the last chapter is the exact opposite of the first one. Chapter one was full of suffering, cries and ill-doing whereas chapter 69 exalts tears of joy and happiness with yet sufficient comical scenes to avoid “sensiblerie”. Some ill doers may be rightly punished but others are granted forgiveness as Roderick and his father show benevolence, love of their brother man, generosity and tenderness. It should not be forgotten that the age of reason was also the age of sensibility, brotherhood and the “intimate connection and interchange of hearts” [2008: 415] which was the solid basis of the pyramid of society.

To say that orderly disorder is order after all has probably become a cliché but to a certain extent, it does correspond to *Roderick Random* whose aim is to reflect humanity as it is, with its flaws and goodnesses, and, through a complex structure, to highlight and encourage its effort towards perfection. The geometrical elements used to carry out the analysis are in accordance with some of the 18<sup>th</sup> century movements which relied on scientific principles to try and solve the mysteries of the universe and define the place of man in the macrocosm. The Newtonian tradition was indeed so far extolled as to infer that “Attraction binds the universe as benevolence binds men”. A further aim was to consider whether the early novel could actually follow similar geometrical principles to architecture and painting, other Smollettian major fields of interest, and hence question the limit between art and craft.

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<sup>2</sup> For further reading on the theories of Edward Said applied to Smollett see Alfred Lutz, “Representing Scotland in *Roderick Random* and *Humphry Clinker*: Smollett’s Development as a Novelist”, *Studies in the Novel* vol.33, March 2001, p. 1-16.

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